

# DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

*A learner centered approach*

*Katia Kazantzoglou*



In most elementary classrooms, some students struggle with learning, others perform well beyond grade-level expectations and the rest fit somewhere in between. Within each of these categories of students, individuals also learn in a variety of ways and have different interests. To meet the needs of a diverse student population, teachers can differentiate their teaching.

At its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to the differences of the learners in the classroom.

*Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or a small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction. The teacher plans the lesson taking into account learner differences thus enabling different types of learners to have a good experience and be motivated to learn well.*

# INDIVIDUAL LEARNER DIFFERENCES :

Easy to identify:

- Age
- Gender
- Socioeconomical status
- Level of education

Difficult to identify:

- Language proficiency level
- Motivation for learning
- Cognitive ability and development
- Personality traits
- Learning strengths, styles, preferences.



## ***HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE :***

Teachers based on student:

- ❖ **Readiness** the skill level and background knowledge of the child.
- ❖ **Interest** the child's affiliation or passion for a particular topic or skill.
- ❖ **Learning profile** the student's learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), preferences for environmental factors (e.g. light, noise, need for movement around the room) and grouping factors (e.g. small group, large group, individual interest, or learning profile ).



can differentiate at least **four** classroom elements :

**1. Content :** what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information, what is taught.

*Examples:* **reading materials** at varying readability levels, text materials on tape, **spelling or vocabulary lists** at readiness levels of students, presenting ideas through both **auditory and visual means**, using **reading buddies**, **re-teach** an idea or skill for struggling learners, or **extend** the thinking or skills of advanced learners.



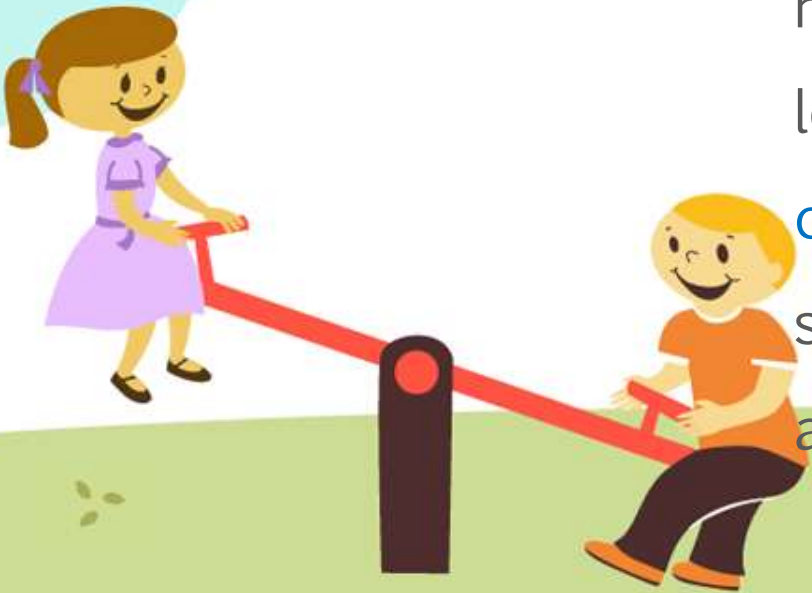
**2. Process :** activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content, how the student learns what is being taught.

*Examples:* **tiered activities** through which all learners work with the same important understandings and skills but proceed with different levels of support, challenge or complexity, **personal agendas** (task lists containing both common work for the whole class and work that addresses individual learners' needs) that must be completed either during specified time or as students complete other work early, **manipulatives** (anything the child can physically hold or see and can be used to help understanding), **varying the length of time** a student may take to complete a task in order to provide additional support for a struggling learner or to encourage an advanced learner to pursue a topic in greater depth.



**3. Products :** projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; how the student shows what he has learnt.

*Examples:* giving students options of how to express required learning (e.g. create a puppet show, write a letter, or make a poster), allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their products, encouraging students to create their own product assignments as long as the assignments contain required elements.





**4. Learning environment** -- the way the classroom works and feels, classroom routines and study guidelines.

*Examples:* making sure there are places in the room to **work quietly** and without distraction as well as places that invite **student collaboration**, providing **materials** that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings, setting out **clear guidelines** for independent work that matches individual needs, developing **routines** that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately and **helping students understand** that some learners need to move around to learn while others do better sitting quietly (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999; Winebrenner, 1992, 1996).

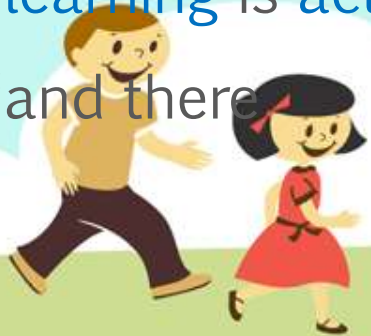


## ***WHAT MAKES DIFFERENTIATION SUCCESSFUL?***

The most important factor in differentiation that helps students achieve more and feel more engaged, is that what teachers differentiate, is **high-quality curriculum and instruction**.

For example, teachers can make sure that:

- \* **curriculum** is clearly focused on the information
- \* **lessons, activities, and products** are designed to ensure that students **engage in, use and come to understand** those essentials
- \* **materials** and **tasks** are **interesting** to students and seem **relevant** to them
- \* **learning** is active
- \* and there is **joy and satisfaction in learning** for each student



There is no recipe for **differentiation**. Rather, **it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning, that values the learner** and can be translated into classroom practice in many ways.

Still, the following **broad principles and characteristics** are useful in establishing a differentiated classroom:

➤ **ASSESSMENT IS ONGOING AND TIGHTLY LINKED TO INSTRUCTION.**

Whatever the teachers can glean about student readiness, interest and learning helps the teachers plan next steps in instruction.

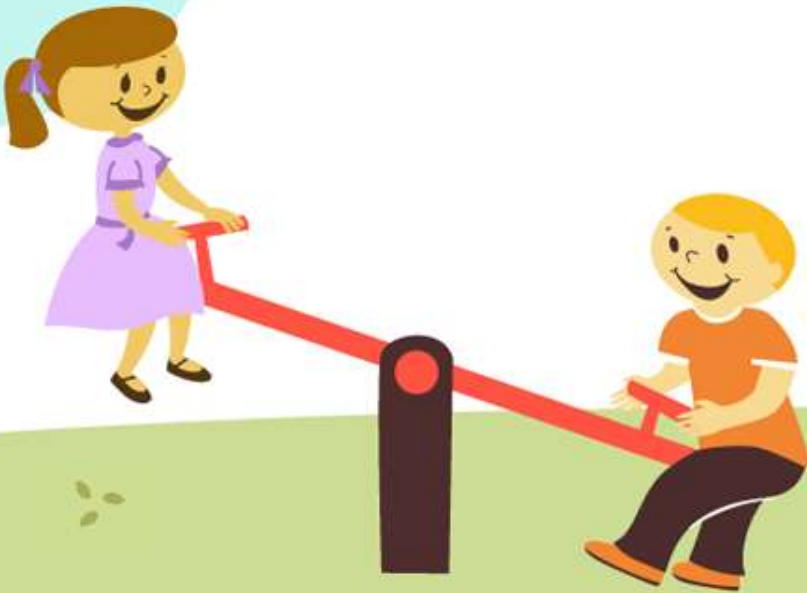
➤ **TEACHERS WORK HARD TO ENSURE "RESPECTFUL ACTIVITIES" FOR ALL STUDENTS.**

Everyone is continually working with tasks that students and teachers perceive to be worthwhile and valuable.

➤ **FLEXIBLE GROUPING IS A HALLMARK OF THE CLASS.**

Teachers plan extended periods of instruction so that all students work with a variety of peers over a period of days (same or mixed readiness groups, similar or different interests, randomly and with the class as a whole. Flexible grouping allows students to see themselves in a variety of contexts and aids the teacher in "auditioning" students in different settings and with different kinds of work.

(Tomlinson, 1995, 1999)



# ***THE BASIC STEPS IN DIFFERENTIATION.***

## 1. Planning Question:

What do I want students to know, understand and be able to do?

## 2. Pre-assessment Question:

Who already knows, understands and/or can use the content or demonstrate the skills? Who needs additional support in order to know, understand and/or demonstrate the skills?

## 3. Differentiation Question:

What can I do for him, her or them so they can make continuous progress and extend their learning?



## ***WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO BEGIN DIFFERENTIATION?***

Teachers are as different as their learners. It is helpful for a teacher who wants to become more effective at differentiation to remember to balance his or her own needs with those of the students.

- Frequently reflect on the match between your classroom and the philosophy of teaching and learning you want to practice.
- Begin to change at a pace that pushes you a little bit beyond your comfort zone--neither totally duplicating past practice nor trying to change everything overnight.
- Think carefully about management routines--for example, giving directions, making sure students know how to move about the room.



- Teach the routines to students carefully, monitor the effectiveness of the routines, discuss results with students, and fine tune together.
- Take time off from change to regain your energy and to assess how things are going.
- Enjoy your own growth. One of the great joys of teaching is recognizing that the teacher always has more to learn than the students.

***Differentiated instruction is a philosophy*** that enables teachers to plan strategically in order to reach the needs of the diverse learners in classrooms today. Differentiation is not just a set of instructional tools but ***a philosophy that a teacher and a professional learning community embrace to reach the needs of every learner.***

-Gregory, 2003, p. 27, Differentiated Instructional Strategies in Practice

